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ABSTRACT

The process of identifying and meeting U.S. national security needs, as well as the needs of international business and trade in the area of foreign languages and international studies, is complex. Three studies of the problem are discussed here: (1) a study by the General Accounting Office of foreign affairs agencies' capacity to obtain needed research involving foreign language ability and knowledge of international affairs; (2) a study by the Rand Corporation of Santa Monica, California, of agencies' needs based on market demand; that is, whether sufficient qualified people are available to fill jobs requiring foreign language and international expertise; and (3) the National Targets Project initiated by the National Council on Foreign Language and International Studies to determine foreign language and international studies-needs as dictated by the national interest. With regard to the American business scene, the Rand corporation study found that U. S. international concerns give little priority to FL competence in staff recruitment, mainly because of the minimal FL communicative proficiency of U.S. college graduates. Recognizing this factor, the President's Commission urged schools of business administration to strengthen the international and FL components of their programs. (AMH)

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OUR FOREIGN LANGUAGE ILLITERACY:

INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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The President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies in reporting its findings to the White House nearly a year ago stated:

> We are profoundly alarmed by what we have found: a serious deterioration in this country's language and research capacity, at a time when an increasingly hazardous international military, political, and economic environment is making unprecedented demands on America's resources, intellectual capacity, and public sensitivity.[1]

Presidential commissions come and go, and, as Elizabeth Drew observed in a piece in the Atlantic Monthly in 1968, "the technique of appointing a special presidential commission ... to investigate, obfuscate, resolve, defuse, defer, detail, or derail a problem has become as much an instrument of the presidency as the State of the Union message."

The frightening pace of world events has not permitted the message of the President's Commission to be consigned to the oblivion typical of most such bodies. The predictions made when the Commission was launched two years ago that poor timing doomed it to ineffectuality -- its coinciding with a presidential election year, economic recession, and dwindling resources and students for higher education -- fortunately and unfortunately have been demolished by international events. These have conspired to affirm the urgency and centrality of the Commission's message.

If the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in early 1979 revealed an intelligence gap and the woeful foreign language inadequacies of our foreign affairs establishment soon after the President's Commission began its one-year mandate, the new conflagration in the middle east drives home yet more the gap between our knowledge capability and needs.

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It would appear that this development caught us by surprise. A New York Times article quotes a U.S. government official as saying that "frankly we're in the Dark Ages when it comes to knowing what makes these countries tick."[2] The article quotes other officials as attributing our unpreparedness to the fact that "it often takes years to train agents to work in the Persian Gulf area because of language and cultural factors."

Another recent event highlighting U.S. foreign language inadequacies in the national security field involved the Russian soldier who sought refuge in the American embassy in Afghanistan last September. Because no one at the embassy could communicate in either of his languages, German and Russian, our Moscow embassy had to fly a Russian-speaking staff member to Kabul. While perhaps a small incident, one wonders that the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan had no one proficient in Russian at a time when the Russian presence had dramatically increased in that country.

These two events, the Iran-Iraq war and the Soviet soldier seeking refuge in the U.S. embassy in Kabul, are only the top of the iceberg with respect to our national security needs in foreign language and international studies. While dismaying they are useful in dramatizing these needs. Identifying and meeting these needs is exceedingly complex, as is also true with respect to our foreign language needs for international business and trade, the other area focussed on in this paper.

A recent study by the General Accounting Office of our foreign affairs agencies' "current and prospective ability to get the research they need" on Soviet affairs found that "with minor exceptions their present research and language capacity is adequate and that they expect to meet foreseeable needs, albeit with increasing difficulty."[3] The GAO study also stated, however, that:

> In the field of Soviet research, the finding of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies that the decline of language and area studies in American education

> is expected to make it more difficult to recruit the desired calibre of research talent.[4]

A major problem which the President's Commission encountered in attempting to assess the nation's foreign policy needs in foreign language and international studies was the fact that job opportunities in the federal government (and elsewhere) for specialists in these fields remain limited. The Rand Corporation of Santa Monica, California, which undertook a study of these needs for the President's Commission[5] pursued its inquiry largely on the basis of market demand. It focussed on whether or not government, business and academia can find sufficient qualified people to fill the jobs requiring foreign language and international studies expertise rather than on the more normative issue of what the federal government's need for such specialists should be. More precisely, Rand did not ask (nor did the Commission ask it to) how many Chinese language specialists the Foreign Service should have, but the very different question of the degree to which the Foreign Service is able to fill positions defined as requiring Chinese (and other foreign language) skills with people who have them.

The Rand Corporation reported that in general the federal government finds no dearth of specialists to fill positions needing them. The study went well beyond these findings, however, and pointed out the factors standing in the way of greater demand for and utilization by the federal government of language and international studies specialists. These include the lack of career incentives for persons to become or remain specialists as it is the generalists who tend to rise in the career ladder, insufficient priority to the long-term research which policy may need but which is all too often a casualty of the pressing demands for short-term reporting, and the difficulty of sustaining specialized skills in rare languages because of cost and other factors. As summarized by John Pincus of Rand who played a central role in its study:

> The government employment and training systems discourage long-term commitment of specialists, long-term intelligence analysis, and maintenance of expertise in exotic languages and areas.[6]

The mandate of what is now commonly referred to as the Perkins Commission ended in fall 1979. Its recommendation that a privately funded body be established to monitor the field of foreign language and international studies, "report on problems and activities, and encourage efforts by all appropriate parties, both in government and the private sector"[7] has been implemented. The establishment of the National Council on Foreign Language and International Studies was announced in May 1980, with funding from the Ford, Rockefeller, Luce, Exxon Education, and other foundations, as well as from the International Communication Agency and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Determined to go beyond a market demand analysis of national needs for foreign language and international studies specialists, the National Council has launched what it calls its National Targets Project in an effort to determine what the national interest dictates these needs should be. The Council has set up committees on all the major world regions to make this study, and their preliminary findings will be reported to the Council early in 1981. The task will be enormously complicated and probably can produce only approximate figures. It will take into account the need for specialists in a range of disciplines and of specialists who combine language and area expertise with knowledge of such major world issues as hunger, energy, population and the like. The National Targets Project will, it is hoped, result in a blueprint of the real needs for international expertise if the United States is to function effectively in its relations with the rest of the world.

Although this project may not produce immediate changes in the recruitment and training of persons in our foreign affairs agencies, it should affect them over time. In so doing more priority may be given to foreign language study

at all levels in our educational system, thus increasing the incentives of students to learn (not just study) and of faculty to teach foreign languages. What of course one hopes is an ultimate result is that we will have in the agencies that handle U.S. foreign affairs the numbers and kinds of persons with foreign language and related competence that the U.S. role in an increasingly complex world requires.

Turning to the field of American business' needs for international expertise, the program statement for this session says that "in order to maintain its status in ... commercial ... relations with other nations, the United States must do a far better job of teaching foreign languages and encouraging their study." Unfortunately, this is difficult to document. The Rand Corporation's study for the President's Commission found that in general American businesses which are involved internationally give a low priority to foreign language competence in their staff recruitment. However, a major reason for this according to Rand is that our colleges and universities fail to turn out graduates with a working knowledge of foreign languages, even among foreign language majors. Confirming this are the preliminary findings of a survey by the Educational Testing Service for the Council on Learning which show that while almost 90 percent of college graduates have studied a foreign language, only 11 percent report having a useful proficiency. Thus, if business made foreign language proficiency a recruitment criterion, they would so narrow the pool of employable candidates as to make recruiting the best talent very difficult. In short, we cannot expect our multinational corporations to demand foreign language proficiency in recruiting their staff unless we produce people with this qualification, along with appropriate training in business, engineering and related fields.

Jobs for our foreign language graduates have sharply declined. A recent

study showed that the percentage of all doctorate recipients in foreign language and literature who were seeking employment went up from 14.3 in 1969 to 38.1 in 1979, while the proportion having definite employment went down from 75.8 percent to 45.2 percent in the same period.[8] While most of these people probably do not consider a career in business, more will be able to only if they on the one hand have a real working competence in their foreign language and on the other hand combine this competence with training in such fields as economics, business administration, journalism, international law and the like.

Some advocates of increased foreign language study point to our inadequacy in foreign languages as a major factor in the deficit in the U.S. balance of payments. While this inadequacy is undoubtedly a factor, other very significant factors are also involved. Unlike many other countries, for example, the United States does not bolster the competitiveness of American business firms involved abroad through special tax advantages, hidden and not so hidden export subsidies, regulatory and other deterrents to foreign imports, and the like -- or not to the degree wanted by American business. Moreover, the United States is apparently unique in imposing income tax on its nationals overseas to the point that American businesses are impelled to employ foreign nationals abroad and to keep their American staff at home. In this connection the advantages of hiring foreign nationals rather than sending American staff abroad should be recognized. McDonalds' franchise operators abroad are, for example, local nationals as a matter of deliberate policy because of their understanding of local customs, the local language and the way things are done in the countries concerned.

These assorted considerations and circumstances diminish the incentives for staff of American businesses to master foreign languages or for persons wanting a career with international business to enhance their employability by gaining a foreign language competence. However, it is still the case that American business

would be more effective abroad if American staff assigned abroad were proficient in the languages of the countries where they are working, especially those at the intermediate level in status. This was recently emphasized by the head of the General Motors plant in Strasbourg in his assertion that "for people who are at the middle-management level and have to talk to local officials, they simply must speak French well." [9] This point is very persuasively made in the recent book by Congressman Paul Simon of Illinois, the father of the President's Commission, a key member of it, and probably the most active advocate in Congress of federal support for foreign language study. On the need for American businesses which are involved internationally to have foreign language competence Congressman Simon wrote as follows:

> Frank A. Weil, former Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Industry and Trade, puts it well: 'Our linguistic parochialism has had a negative effect on our trade balance. In fact it is one of the most subtle nontariff barriers to our export expansion.... Part of the reason the Japanese and the Germans sell so effectively is that they have gone to the trouble of learning about us and adapting the products they export to our tastes and markets. An impressive number of their businessmen have learned our language, and foreign business students usually have international studies as part of the curriculum.' [10]

On this topic the report of the President's Commission stated that "it is the Commission's view that one serious barrier to American business is its lack of foreign language and area expertise." But the Commission, recognizing that American business firms are unlikely to hire foreign language majors who lack other professional training, urged that schools of business administration strengthen the international components in their curricula and encourage their students to study foreign languages. Although the new dean of the Harvard Business School, John H. McArthur, may not have based his priorities as the new dean on the Commission's report, it is noteworthy that he has announced as one

of his three main areas of concentration "developing an even more international outlook" at the school.

Samuel L. Hayden, a consultant to the Commission, well summarized what needs to happen if American business is to give a higher priority to foreign language and international studies expertise and hence to be a force in reversing the trend of declining enrollments in these fields:

> In an attempt to reverse this trend, analysts look to new clients to rejuvenate these fields of study. For a variety of reasons U.S. multinationals and other exporting firms are seen as potential clients. But they will not be large takers of foreign language and international studies specialists until some significant changes take place. From the corporate viewpoint, foreign languages and international studies expertise is a tool requiring a relationship to functional business knowledge. That link needs to be made on the campuses, and the business schools are likely places to start. The burden of demonstrating the utility of interdisciplinary programs is on the universities themselves.... The demand-pull from U.S. corporations for university foreign language and international studies expertise will only come after the value of such is shown. [1]

Although Hayden did not discuss the half dozen professional graduate schools of foreign affairs in this country, highly pertinent to his thesis is the fact that an increasing proportion of the students coming out of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and their fellow institutions around the country are going into international business firms. These schools offer the interdisciplinary approach Hayden urges, and in the last few years they also can point to increasing foreign language competence in their graduates. The output of these schools is know to and recruited by American businesses which are active internationally.

As was mentioned earlier, the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies is not typical of such commissions in going out of

existence and leaving no perceptible results. The Commission's recommendations relating to business are an important example of this exceptional nature of the Commission. These recommendations have now been incorporated into national legislation: the reauthorization of the National Defense Education Act, Title VI, which is now Title VI, International Education Programs, of the newly reauthorized Higher Education Act.

Part B of this title provides for federal funding of Business and International Education Programs. More specifically, it authorizes matching grants from the federal government to mount or strengthen programs which will "forge links between the business community and higher education." These programs should involve business and other professional schools and programs in foreign language and international studies. The general purpose is to strengthen the international skills of the business community, and this, of course, includes foreign language competence. Much of the driving force behind this legislation was the deep concern in Congress for our trade deficit and the conviction that strengthening the international expertise of American business would improve our ability to function effectively abroad.

Legislation is thus now in place which can bring together foreign language and professional school faculty, especially in business, in common efforts to the benefit of teaching programs in languages and in professional fields. But if such programs are to gain from federal funding, the foreign language profession should take the initiative. This will not happen easily. But it must happen if the opportunity presented by the new legislation is to be seized in order to make foreign language study more central to American education and to the needs of American business.

Finally, the new National Council on Foreign Language and International Studies has a substantial representation in its membership drawn from the business community. This was deliberate. If these fields are to achieve the

recognition which the national interest requires, American business has to be behind it. The commitment of business, reflected in the make-up of the National Council, must find its counterpart in higher education and in our entire educational system. It is very much up to the foreign language profession to make this happen.

1. Strenth Through Wisdom, A Critique of U.S. Capability, A Report to the President from the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (November 1979, U.S. GPO), p. 1.

2. Philip Taubman, "Gulf War Said to Reveal U.S. Intelligence Lapses," New York Times, September 29, 1980, p. 5.

3. Comptroller General, Federally-Financed Research and Communication on Soviet Affairs: Capabilities and Needs (July 2, 1980, U.S. General Accounting Office), p. 5.

4. Ibid., p. 5.

5. Sue E. Berryman et. al., Foreign Language and International Studies Specialists: The Marketplace and National Policy (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, September 1979).

6. John Pincus, "Rand Meets the President's Commission: The Life Cycle of a Non-Event," New Directions in International Education, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (May 1980), p. 85.

7. Strength Through Wisdom , p. 136.

8. Peter D. Syverson, Summary Report,1979 Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities (March 1980, Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences), p. 11.

9.Herb Altschull, "Exports: The Decline of the American Manager," New York Times, September 14, 1980, p. F3.

10. Paul Simon, The Tongue-Tied American, Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis(New York: Continuum, 1980), pp. 28-29.

11. Samuel L. Hayden, "Foreign Languages, International Studies, and Business (A Dubious Savior)," New Directions in International Education, The Annals (May 1980), p. 141.